

Mu Hine with Brass Rings

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Six-year old Mu Hine sat on a red and yellow bamboo mat in the middle of the sun-blasted dirt road. A small bead of sweat left a glistening trail down her temple and along the side of her cheek. She sat ramrod straight with an unwaveringly serious face. She rested her hands on her skinny legs which were crossed in front of her. She was dressed the way most of the women in her village do: a short black sarong with pink trim and white tunic and, except for the short bangs that ran across her forehead, her hair pulled up in pink, yellow, and green scarves. An old woman stood over her, bent almost in half at the waist, her strong hands tugging and prying at a thin brass coil around Mu Hine's neck. She was unwinding the coil, using her wiry fingers and hands to loosen it until she could pull it over the girl's head. A man stood nearby, a hefty video camera on his shoulder aimed at Mu Hine and the old lady while an American TV journalist angled for the best view. The girl mostly ignored them; she was used to foreigners watching her and recording her image on high-tech devices. Once the coil was removed Mu Hine tentatively moved her neck side to side and forwards and back. "I feel light!" she declared, flashing her dimpled smile and revealing slightly crooked teeth. The dirt road in which Mu Hine was sitting runs through the middle of her village, known to visitors as Ban Noy Soi Long-neck Village, in the province of Mae Hong Son in northern Thailand about 4 kilometers from the

Burmese border. Mu Hine's village is like many other small, remote villages in Thailand. The houses are simple ones, constructed of bamboo and wood with a few corrugated roofs between the mostly leaf and straw roofed houses. Pigs and chickens grunt and cluck from their pens and along the dirt paths. There is a small dirt-floor elementary school with smaller classrooms separated only by thin bamboo partitions and a few shops. The village is situated in a narrow valley between two short but steep hills and, unlike most Thai villages, there are no rice fields nearby, only a few small family gardens. The people in Mu Hine's village are not allowed to earn money farming fragrant Jasmine rice like their Thai neighbors do; they earn their living from another generations-old tradition. Tourists from around the world come to villages like Ban Nay Soi to look at the women and girls like Mu Hine whose necks are wrapped in brass coils that compress their shoulders and rib cage, making their necks appear unusually long.

The complications begin with the most basic facts about this group of people. In English, Mu Hine's ethnic group is usually called "Longneck Karen," but each of the linguistic groups in the forest of languages that surrounds Mu Hine's people use a different name. The Burmese call them the Padaung. In Thai, they're Kariang Kaw Yaw. Their neighboring "hill-tribe," the Kayah, call them Lya Kher, which roughly translates as

“the top of the river,” where Mu Hine’s people are known to live in their homeland Karenni State. In their own language, they refer to themselves as Kayan or, simply, people.

The name of her village is equally complicated. It is sometimes called Ban Nay Soi and appears to be only a few square acres of land off of a dirt road. But her village is only the most visible section of a large refugee camp, Karenni Refugee Camp #1. Thousands of refugees, like Mu Hine and her family, have sought shelter in these camps in Thailand. Their homeland, Karenni State, a Connecticut-sized area of Southeast Asia, has been under Burmese occupation since 1948.

Karenni people, led mostly by the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), began resisting the occupation almost immediately after it began. The KNPP claims that prior to Burmese occupation, Karenni State was comprised of five sovereign states, each with its own *Sawbwa*, or prince, none of who answered to any nearby powers; neither the Burmese, the Thais, nor the British. Today, of the total population of 200,000, about 50,000 Karenni people, called Internally Displaced People (IDPs) are said to be living and hiding from the Burmese Army in the mountainous jungles of their homeland. About 20,000 have sought refuge in the camps in Thailand. The refugees have fled forced relocation and labor, arbitrary arrest, torture and execution, and theft and destruction of their crops, livestock and villages at the hands of the Burmese to the relative safety of the refugee camps. In short, the Burmese are destroying the already sparsely populated and remote Karenni State.

Most of the refugees are supported by international NGO’s who provide basic food rations, building materials, health care, and education. But the people who live in Mu Hine’s section and other two similar villages that are located further from the refugee camp are in the unique position of being able to earn money. Tourists who visit Section 19 pay a fee of about US\$7. In exchange, they are allowed to wander through the village, look at, talk to and photograph the women who wear the brass rings on their necks. Some Kayan women also have brass rings on their legs just below the knee, navy blue pieces of cotton covering their shins, and aluminum bracelets that clack when they move their arms. The tourists can also buy the items that the women sell at their stalls: brightly-colored hand-woven scarves that hang from bamboo poles,

postcards and carvings of “long-neck” women, silver bracelets, wooden frogs that chirp, chirp, chirp when you rub a stick against their backs, and pencils with small long-neck dolls sticking out from the eraser end. On a few tables are a set of the rings that they wear so that tourists can feel their heft (up to 5 kilograms) and see how the word “rings” is a misnomer. The women actually wear one continuous coil that is tightened so that it only appears to be one ring stacked on top of the next.

In addition to the money that they earn from selling their wares, the women who wear the brass earn a monthly salary from the fee tourists pay to enter the village. Little girls like Mu Hine earn about US\$14 a month, or the same amount that a new teacher earns in the refugee camps. Adult women earn about three-times that. It is unclear what happens to the rest of the money that is collected at the entrance. Some people say that it goes to local Thai businesspeople. Some claim that part of the money goes to fund the resistance in Karenni State. There is more money beyond what is distributed to the women, but whoever gets it doesn’t leave a paper trail.

Perhaps as confusing as what happens to the money is the question of why the women wear the rings in the first place. One might as well ask a young American why she pierces her lip, her nose, her chin, or her eyebrow. When asked, the answer that most of the Kayan women give is a single, unexplained word: “tradition.” Some people believe that the women started to wear the rings in order to emulate their mythical dragon forebears. Others say that the rings were meant to protect the women from being attacked by tigers or to make them less attractive to surrounding tribes that might want to carry the women off for themselves or to sell into slavery.

Some people claim that it used to be that only certain girls, born on certain days, wore the rings, but today that is no longer the case. Today it is up to the girl and her family. Mu Hine, for example, explained that even though her mother didn’t wear the rings, she wanted to because all of her friends and the other women in the village had them. Her mother had put them on her neck when Mu Hine was five years old, the typical age for a girl’s first set of rings, but she hadn’t done it properly and so rather than laying one loop smoothly on top of the next, there were unattractive gaps and spaces between each level. This is why they’d asked the old

woman to put on a new set of rings. The camera crew and the American journalist were conveniently shooting that day and wanted to watch and record the replacement of the rings, a process that typically happens once every few years in a girl's life until her original coil of about 5 rings reaches a height of 20 rings or more.

The little girl sat patiently while the old woman removed the rings and the journalist and the cameraman scrutinized and commented in English. Her mother sat some distance away, off camera, on a wooden bench in front of a nearby shop watching her daughter. Ringless, Mu Hine said it felt strange to have them off and she became dizzy. One of the myths often told about the Kayan is that the women's neck muscles grow weak with disuse and that the rings cannot be removed. If they are, the myth claims, the woman's head will flop over and she'll suffocate. As Mu Hine touched the soft skin of her neck and moved her head up and down and side to side, in movements that are otherwise restricted by the rings, it was obvious that she was in no danger of suffocating. According to observers, however, when older women take off their rings, they can't walk in a straight line. The rings, which hold their heads firmly in place, can affect their sense of balance so that when the rings are removed, the women wobble and sway back and forth when they walk.

Mu Hine's neck didn't look especially long with the rings off. In fact, she may have been too young for any physical changes to be apparent to the naked eye. "Long neck" is not only an overly simple identifier, but an inaccurate one as well. The women's necks aren't elongated. Rather, the weight of the brass, which can total thirty to forty pounds or fifty to sixty including the rings on their legs, pushes down their clavicles, vertebrae, and ribs so that their necks appear long above their sloping shoulders. X-rays taken at Mae Hong Son hospital (and explained on fliers around town titled "The Secret of the Giraffe Women Revealed!") show that the spaces between the vertebrae in their necks are no greater than in non-ring wearers.

Their changed appearance does nothing to detract from their beauty in the minds of Kayan men or Karen men from other ethnic groups. Some foreigners do not agree. In "Sketch of Wild Karen Tribes," a pamphlet compiled in 1895 for and by Baptist missionaries, the un-named author writes, "The appearance of a Padaung woman is most peculiar, her small head, the

long brass bound neck, sloping shoulders, and sack-like appearance of the *thindaing* [shirt] suggesting a champagne bottle, and those who, acting under the advice of the village pastors, had discarded the brass work coiled around their necks and legs looked like a young cockerel extending his neck to the utmost when learning to crow."

Mu Hine, still sitting in the hot sunshine so that the cameraman could get the best possible light, looked more like a little girl than a young cockerel. The brass had stained the skin on her neck black and red, stains that all of the women get and which outsiders and tourists often confuse with bruising. Other than the dizziness, Mu Hine didn't complain of any pain during the removal and replacement of her rings. She sat and waited patiently as the old woman warmed the new brass coil in the sun and with the friction of her hands in order to make it soft enough to manipulate. Older women wear thicker brass coils and those ones have to be warmed in a fire or coals. Once the ring was wide and soft, the old woman started at the bottom and slowly tightened the coil around the little girl's neck. Her skilled hands carefully curved the metal so that it was smooth and even, tight enough to Mu Hine's neck so that it didn't move too much, and yet loose enough that the girl was comfortable. There were no more gaps and spaces between each loop of the new stack. The task completed, Mu Hine's fingers climbed up the stack from one level to the next, like it was a staircase. She mouthed the numbers to herself. "Nine!" she exclaimed when her fingers reached the top. It was two more coils than she had been wearing before. She started to run off back to school, but her mother, still seated on the bench in front of the store, called her back. She needed to fix the brass around the lower part of the girl's legs. School would have to wait.

Missing an afternoon of first grade might not seem like much of a sacrifice in the life of a young girl especially one who, presumably, has years of learning and education in front of her. But in a refugee camp where educational limitations are only further compounded by the fact that a young girl who wears the rings is supporting her parents and family, missing one day or afternoon of school can sometimes descend down a slippery slope of dropping out of school altogether.

Because the Kayan families supplement the girls' monthly allotments with the money that the tourists spend on trinkets and hand-made crafts, Kayan girls

who wear the rings are often caught between the desire for higher education and their families' economic security. Parents know that tourists are more likely to spend money at stalls where actual ring-wearing girls sell the wares. In order to make more money, some parents have their daughters stay at home to greet the tourists rather than go to school. As a result, few of the girls who wear the rings make it to the upper levels of high school that are available in the camps.

By comparison, Kayan girls who don't wear the rings have more educational opportunities available to them. Annabelle was one such girl. As an adult, she was a serious woman with a sense of authority that belied her small, just under five foot stature. Her voice was soft and high, but full of a sense of conviction. As both the daughter of the headman in one of the Longneck villages and as the liaison between foreign visitors and Karenni organizations at the Karenni Foreign Office, conviction as well as charm were necessary traits. Annabelle had both in spades.

In the early 1980s, when Annabelle was about seven, her parents tried to put the rings on her. At that point, Annabelle and her family were living on the Karenni side of the Thai-Karenni border. Although there were no formal refugee camps or "long-neck" villages, a handful of foreigners would come to visit the Kayan and Annabelle's parents had the foresight to see that there would be some economic benefit to wearing the rings.

But Annabelle didn't want to wear them. In a photograph from that time, she is ankle-deep in a stream and her aunt is standing behind and bent over her. Annabelle is wearing a dark orange sarong and a short stack of rings. Black and red stained water runs down the front of her bare chest. Her aunt is scrubbing the rings with a small, yellow sponge. Annabelle looks exhausted. Her full lips sit expressionless between her fat, round cheeks. She is staring down and to her right at some unseen spot. Her hair is messy and there is sweat on her temples; she looks like she's been fighting. Her left hand is clenched into a fist.

Annabelle wore the rings for three days and cried the entire time. Finally, her parents agreed to remove them. Even at seven, Annabelle knew that the rings would keep her from getting an education. "I had never seen a person who wore the rings finish high school," she explained. As a result of the determination and

ambition that she exhibited even as a seven year old, Annabelle became the first girl from her village to finish high school. She also attended Post Ten (the equivalent of college prep) in Camp #3 and went to Chiang Mai, the closest major Thai city, for Foreign Affairs Training, a one-year program for ethnic minorities. Her education has allowed her to do internships in both the Philippines and in England. After her internships, she returned to Mae Hong Son to work in the Karenni Foreign Office and with the Karenni Student Union. Unlike most refugees, she carries a Thai ID card and is able to move relatively freely between the town of Mae Hong Son, the camps, and her village of Huay Sua Tao. Had she worn the rings, Annabelle would not have had these opportunities.

Local Thai authorities largely require that the women like Annabelle's mother, cousins, and the other women around her who wear the rings stay in their own villages; if the milk is free, one might say, why buy the cow? It's difficult for any refugees to move easily in Thailand outside of their camps. Most people who legally live on Thai soil carry an identification card, but not all forms of ID are equal. In a system not unlike apartheid, the different cards allow the bearer different levels of freedom of movement. The white card means its owner is a full Thai citizen who can move freely within the country, get a passport to travel abroad, and buy land, houses, cars, and motorbikes, a right not given to non-Thais in Thailand. The other two cards, the green and the blue, grants their possessor the same freedom of movement (within his/her own district), but the blue card indicates that he/she is one step closer to the white card. The green card is therefore considered the card that provided the least mobility and was often called the "hill tribe" ID. Refugees carry no ID and are unable to legally leave the camps. Because of their unique situation as a tourist attraction and the desire on the part of the local Thai authorities to keep them at least somewhat placated, some Kayan people, men and women both, carry a green ID card. Even though they can, therefore, technically go outside of their village, their movement is limited. The women are unlikely to go unnoticed if they go far from their villages. Indeed, one of the few groups of ring-wearing women to ever leave Southeast Asia were taken to England to be a part of the circus there; it is easy to see how they would cause commotion wherever they go outside of their villages. Thai authorities forbid women with

the rings to drive a motorbike, the most common form of transportation in rural Thailand. They claim it's for the women's own safety, but the women understand that it's one more way to prevent them from being seen out in public. Everyone makes more money if the women stay in their place. With their tenuous hold on basic freedoms and safety, the Kayan, and the other refugees, are in a position where it is easy for others to take advantage of them.

"I feel so sad when I see the tourists come and take pictures of our people who wear the rings. Our Kayan have very little education and knowledge," Annabelle said. "They don't even know their rights. They are exploited by some people but never know about it. I feel so frustrated about this. I would like to help my people to understand their situation and their lives. I also encourage their parents to send their children to school, even those who wear the rings. I educate their parents not to force their children to put the rings on. Regarding the rings, the girls must decide on their own."

Young Mu Hine decided to wear the rings because all of her friends and other women were doing it. Can a six year old make a smart decision about something that will affect her for the rest of her life? Did Mu Hine understand the consequences of her decision? And, in spite of Annabelle's fears that the rings are holding the women back and allowing her people to be exploited, is it possible for the women and the Kayan to use the rings to their own advantage? Because slowly, it seems, the once set-in-stone fate of the women with the brass rings is beginning to change.

There are perhaps new opportunities for the next generation of ring-wearers like Mu Ra and Zable, two young women who live in Mu Hine's village. Mu Ra was tall and thin with a long, narrow face. She and Zable were inseparable. Zable was shorter. She was also thin, but her face was round with plump cheeks. In appearance and temperament, Zable was a gregarious Ernie to Mu Ra's more reserved Bert. The two were often together and often entertaining in one of their homes. They seemed to be perpetually inviting people to come stop in for a cup of tea or a glass of water. And with guests present, Zable would slice a pineapple or other fresh fruit; both were always the consummate hostesses.

The girls were bright – they were often at the top of their classes and were the first girls with rings to attend high school in the camp. Their parents had been supportive of them continuing their education. They were both worried, however, about whether or not they would be able to go on to Post Ten, the best educational option in the camps beyond high school. Only a handful of students are accepted into Post Ten each year. The application process involves an entrance exam and an interview in English. In addition to their own worries, people in the larger community had their eyes on the two girls, hoping that they would succeed.

Karenni leadership, even as far up as a Major General in the Karenni Army, was watching Mu Ra and Zable. The Major General would on occasion ask about the girls, specifically about their education. He hoped that the two girls would be able to attend college in Chiang Mai. He thought that because the girls were bright and had Thai hill tribe ID cards, special arrangements could be made with Thai authorities to allow them to move to Chiang Mai. The Major General's interest in Mu Ra and Zable seemed curious and random. Behind his benign concern, however, it is likely that the Major General wanted the girls to go to Chiang Mai University because they, the Kayan and their flashy brass rings, were one of the few ways in which the Karenni and the military conflict got any attention from the outside world or from international media. The Major General was not shy about using the women and their rings in this way. When he talked about the reasons why the women wear the rings, he brushed away suggestions about mythical dragons or tigers or to avoid slavery. The women wear the rings, he explained, to identify them as Karenni. The tradition of wearing the rings started long before there even was a Karenni State or the idea of a Karenni identity, but the Major General was willing to look beyond that history to find a way to use the women and their international notoriety.

Inside Karenni State, the tradition appears to be dying. It is said that only two villages still practice the ring-wearing tradition. In the meantime, outside of Karenni State, the Karenni, the Kayan, the Thais, even the women themselves and their parents, are driven by a different motivation towards the same futile task. They are grasping at the dying tradition.

Even Annabelle is confounded by the situation: "Now I can see some of Kayan ladies who put the rings

on are able to attend Grade 9. I am so happy for them. I don't want to [lose] my traditions. If a person understands their rights, has education, and is free to make decisions, they can wear the rings if they are willing. But they must think seriously. I think I am free without having the rings, but still I am burdened when I think about my people. Unless my people are free, I won't say that I am free."

It is true that Mu Ra and Zable might have more educational opportunities available to them than women of ring-less Annabelle's generation. Perhaps the little girl, Mu Hine, when her stack of coils grows to twenty or more, will be able to go to college or work in a professional field. For the time being, however, girls like Mu Ra and Zable are both liberated and constrained by a decision that their parents made for them when they were little girls.

On the one hand, Mu Ra and Zable have greater financial stability than any of the other refugees. They have a steady monthly income and, as long as the tourists keep coming, will continue to have money. Many of the Kayan women also have Thai hill tribe ID cards. Compared to other refugees, Mu Ra and Zable are also exposed to more of the world outside their own refugee camps. On a daily basis there are tourists from all over the world visiting them and the ones who stop for a moment often talk about their home countries.

At one of the stalls in the village one day, a group of French tourists were walking toward a stall where one of the ring-wearing women was posted. As the tourists approached, the young woman called to them, "Bonjour!" Enticed, the tourists came to look at her wares.

"Ç'est combien?" one of the men asked.

"Deux cent baht," the Kayan woman answered.

"Tu parles vraiment bien le français. Ils pesent beaucoup tes bagues?"

"7 kilos."

"Ç'est beaucoup. Ça fait mal?"

"Non. J'ai l'habitude."

"Est-ce-que je peut prendre ta photo?"

"Oui. Pourquoi pas?"

The man and his wife sat down on either side of the woman for the photo. The Kayan woman spoke French with French mannerisms: her lips pressed forward, she occasionally blew puffs of air out from her inflated

cheeks and tilted her head and shrugged her shoulder in a nonchalant way. Though the French tourists were impressed, the linguistic feat is commonplace amongst the Kayan women who live in touristed villages. Other women speak bits and pieces of other tourist languages: Japanese, German, Spanish, Chinese, and English. The walls inside some of the homes are lined with pictures and postcards from far away places: reverse souvenirs sent by tourists who paused long enough to exchange addresses. But for the women, it is a catch-22. It is their rings that draw the tourists to this otherwise remote region of the world. Through the tourists the Kayan women learn about these places and they learn about the world, but in all likelihood, because they wear the rings and because they are stateless, they will never be able to travel there.

Amongst the many foreigners who visit Mu Hine's village, a British journalist and his wife once passed through. The women with the brass rings inspired a conversation that quickly devolved into an argument. The wife wanted to buy some of the brass coils.

"It's artwork," she said.

"It's not artwork," the husband replied, growing frustrated with her simplistic take on the rings. "It's bondage." The rings are made to hold the women back, to constrain and confine them, he argued. Neither side of their argument is accurate. As a piece of "art" as the journalists's wife was describing it, the rings belong on a dusty museum shelf, catalogued forever as a relic of a lost culture, but Kayan culture isn't lost—at least not yet. Also, if the women have more freedom and opportunities than their non-ring wearing Karenni counterparts, is it their rings or the fact that they are members of a persecuted ethnic minority group that constrains them?

These women live in the middle of the classic tension between belonging to practicing a traditional culture and the forward progress of minority groups, specifically women in this case, within that culture. Then add money to this tension; the fact that outsiders are willing to pay for this culture to hold on to its tradition. Add to this the fact that the culture is being destroyed by another group of outsiders, the Burmese. Add to this the way in which people within the culture are clinging to the last vestiges of their dying traditions in order to resist their complete destruction. It's no wonder Mu Hine became dizzy.

Some refugees talk a lot about “home,” about Karenni State. They seem always to be thinking about when they are going to be able to go back. Even those who are too young to have anything but a few memories of the place thought about it almost constantly, imagining and re-imagining their memories over and over until they were worn thin. They long for a time and a place of freedom.

Returning to Karenni State isn’t so inevitable for the Kayan women. Some say that yes, eventually, they want to go back. Other say yes, for a visit and then come back to Thailand. The women are still practicing one part of Karenni culture and tradition, but they are practicing it in a new time and place, and in that new time and place that culture is changing. These women, who are oftentimes the only face of the resistance in Karenni State that the rest of the world sees, no longer seem to know and remember Karenni State as intimately as other refugees do. They are from the same mountains, but having tasted some prosperity, they are reluctant to return to the poverty of their homeland. And so, perhaps, the traditions of Karenni State really are dying. Perhaps the Burmese army is successful in its attempts to eradicate Karenni culture.

Sitting at her family’s stall one afternoon, eating longans, Mu Hine offered her clear-eyed and unconfused idea of who she is and where she belongs. “I am this!” she said, pointing to her body, her rings, her clothes. “I am Kayan,” she said. She denied being Karenni, but said the name of a Karenni village, Daw Bay, when a visitor asked where her parents were from.

“Do you want to go there?” the woman asked.

“Yes,” Mu Hine replied.

“To visit or to live?”

“To visit. I want to live here,” she pointed her finger down, at the ground of Section 19.

“Why don’t you go to visit your mother and father’s village now?” The woman inquired. Did the little girl know about the war in Karenni State?

Mu Hine laughed at such a silly suggestion. “I can’t go now. I don’t have time. I have to go to school.”